

Parent Involvement – the practice of principals in lower primary schools in Switzerland

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In a project of qualitative social research we analyse the interviews with eight principals of Swiss primary schools. We analyse the attitudes and the practice of parent involvement in these schools, which depend on the socioeconomic status of the community, the professional experience and the actual management style of the school director. We found a great variety of practices that are based on different attitudes on how to interact with parents. We can see a dichotomy of strategies: one is the way how the principals deal with parents who relate to the school to enforce their individual interests in their own child or its success at school. The other one concerns parents who obviously do not cooperate with the school. Patterns of best practice are analysed and will be used as a material to train student teachers. The practice of the principal is not only determined by the parents and the social context of the school. The biographical and the professional experience of the principal, the management style, which means the formation of the school culture and networking in the community, represent an important part of the practice of a principal.

Keywords: Parent involvement, School improvement, Qualitative research.

Context

The education system of Switzerland is organized in regional units named cantons. Historically the cantons are old States which formed the Swiss Confederation as a nation in 1848. The cultural and religious differences between these former states are the reason why the competence for education and schooling remained in the cantons. However, since 2006 Switzerland has had an article in the national constitution that gives the Federal Government the authority to coordinate the regional education systems. This coordination concerns e.g. the structure of primary schools as well as the duration of the different school levels. This project of harmonization of the Swiss school system will be realized within the next couple of years. So, today's school systems are different in every canton (Annen, 2010).

During the last decade almost every canton has reformed its school system. Canton Solothurn has introduced schools with formal principals or school directors in a school district. Principals are responsible for administration, the quality of education, school development and school improvement. This reform just started recently and the principals of the primary schools are still looking for the profile of their school. Some understand their role as managers and administrators, others are more concerned with school development, some are leading figures in their school and some others are more the former colleagues and so on.

Parent involvement is a legal duty for every teacher. Principals are responsible for school culture and the quality of education. When difficulties occur with parents that the teachers cannot deal with, the principal supports his staff and tries to mediate or to solve the problem. He calls parents into school to inform them about school matters. The overall goal is to improve students' records and to have fewer conflicts with parents with different views on learning and

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education. In Canton Solothurn, parent involvement is part of the quality concept of every school. The quality system is based on the Q2E system, which means quality by evaluation and improvement (Landwehr & Steiner 2008). Module 5 of the quality system is about how the relationship between school and parents is designed. Questions posed by the evaluators are: does a written policy about the cooperation of school and parents exist and has such a document entered into force? The objective of the document is part of the quality concept of the school as well (Amt für Volksschule und Kindergarten, 2007, 19). At the beginning of the reform, the way to achieve an agreement between school and parents was quite different. In some schools the strategy of cooperation is very participative, parents are involved in discussing and developing the paper, in some other schools the agreement is written by the principal, discussed with the teachers and then discussed with, or sometimes directly opened to, the parents. Some other schools choose a third way. They develop an agreement that they only present to parents causing difficulties when they do not exercise their duty in the domain of cooperation with the school. An excerpt of a school agreement based on a partnership between school and parents is shown in *Figure 1*. The school agreement is a commitment for both sides, parents and teachers. When problems occur, the document is a good basis for mediation. The school has the possibility to refer to the written standards that concern e.g. the behaviour of the children.

This year, schools have to sign the agreements with parents or the representatives of parents. These agreements are mostly written contracts about educational objectives and list the duties of parents, students and teachers. Depending on the socioeconomic context of the school, they have different agreements, e.g. special paragraphs for immigrant parents.

Research approaches and practice in Switzerland

Literature about parent involvement exists in all German-speaking countries and the issues discussed in the research literature are almost the same in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Neuenschwander et al. (2008) show in a representative study that parents have great influence on the performance of students. The support students get at home and the

participation of parents in school matters broadens the differences in the achievement between middle- and upper-class parents and educationally-disadvantaged families. Lanfranchi (2002) analyses the effect of preschool socialisation in immigrant families. He could prove positive effects when these children visit day care centers or nurseries. An open-minded educational style of parents and the intercultural knowledge of the teachers had a positive impact on learning outcomes.

In Switzerland, constitutional rights concerning education give priority to parents. In the legislation of the canton we have three reasons, why schools challenge this fact: firstly, school attendance is compulsory in Switzerland. Parents are obliged to send children to the school in time. They have to get enough sleep and must be adequately fed. Secondly, primary schools now have the possibility to negotiate school agreements with parents. The school defines the expectations about the behaviour of students. Finally, school can interfere when teachers believe that education and educational support has a poor level in a family. They can request the opinion of social authorities, when they believe that the child is neglected.

Nevertheless, we notice in Swiss primary schools that teachers have increasing problems with parents. Parents complain more often about examinations and decisions of school authority e.g. when children are removed from a class or when they do not manage to reach a higher school level. These parents have high expectations, mostly on special topics that are not yet treated in school, even when the issue is dealt with later. On the other hand, there are families with low socioeconomic status. Very often, these are working parents, who have no time for school matters. In such neighborhoods, about 30 percent of the parents do not show up when the principal arranges meetings to inform about school matters. In most Swiss cantons it is possible to impose fines on parents that never show up at school for consultations or meetings. To sum up, at the moment the research interest is the practice of principals and teachers as well as the strategies they pursue and standards they have fixed about parent involvement.

In our research, the opinions and the values of principals and teachers are important. Principals and teachers usually make external attributions when problems with students occur: either there are reasons in the behaviour of the concerned

student or they think that there are educational problems in the family. Bauer (2006) argues that difficulties in the cooperation between school and families can be explained by the double external attribution on both sides: teachers attribute behavioural defects to the families and families attribute poor achievements of students only to the teachers. So the reflection on the reasons of poor achievements and the consideration of both sides could be a good way of communication.

When we compare parent involvement in Switzerland with the known forms of cooperation between schools and families, we see a limited understanding of what parent involvement can be. When we look at the six dimensions of cooperation and partnership of schools and families that EPSTEIN et al. (2009) have elaborated, we see that some of these dimensions are missing or are not included in explicit standards of parent involvement in Swiss schools. *Parenting* is an issue discussed only when there are problems with students like violence, drugs or pornography. Parenting is often delegated to social workers in the school or special institutions that include those families in education programs, such as Opstapje (Sann, 2005). *Communication with parents*: written feedback, letters to the families or newsletters of the school are usually not adapted to the language skills of families with low socioeconomic status or of immigrant families. You can find all the technical terms of educational science with no explanation for those families. Third point is *Volunteering*: there are some schools

that work with volunteers in the school. Mostly, they are welcome to accompany a class for an excursion or help to prepare school events like student theatre and so on. But there is little involvement of parents helping children in the classroom. Swiss Teacher Associations are afraid of deprofessionalisation. The lack of concepts for volunteers in the classroom causes confusion in the roles. *Learning support at home*: in Switzerland, children have a lot of homework to do. The amount of homework increases from year to year. Parents are asked to check the homework and monitor the time pupils spend on it. But there is no monitoring of how to learn and how a student's working space should be organised at home. These are ways that might help families with a lower socioeconomic status to give better support to the learning activities of their children at home. These issues explain partially the gap

between the way the lower- and upper-class regard success at school.

Participation: normally, schools have a parents' association which gives advice to the principal of the school. An unwritten law says that only parents are welcome that have children in that school. There is little direct communication among parents. The school has no structures to strengthen the communication among parents. Therefore, parents at the parents' meetings frequently discuss the problems of their own children. This might give them an advantage compared with families which are not present at the parents' meetings. Last but not least: collaborating with the community is a dimension that is little practiced by teachers. Communication with authorities in the community is often delegated to the school director.

To sum up, most of the time parent involvement in Switzerland is nothing but ritualized meetings, where teachers either inform parents about students' achievements, or - on special occasions - where specific problems with a child are discussed. Educational issues are only discussed when there is an obvious problem with a single student or the class as a whole.

Research question and sample.

The research group was first interested in the practice of school culture in primary schools. School culture was defined by the social competence, the values and beliefs of all teachers, the staff and the principal of the school. In addition, the principal in primary schools forms and develops school culture and standards. So we focus on the patterns of interpretations (quoted from Schütz, 2004) and the practice of principals in primary schools.

We have a qualitative research approach; our focus of interest is the subjective opinions on parent involvement in primary schools. We wanted to see whether the strategies in schools vary in relation to the socioeconomic status of the community of the school or whether the strategies vary in relation to the patterns of interpretation of the principal of the school that develops a specific school culture. Research questions are e.g.:

- What are the patterns of interpretation of principals and what are the management styles related to parent involvement?
- How can a school adapt the activities in parent involvement to the character of the families or to the structure of the community?

- What is the division of labour between the principal and his teachers? Do we find a support structure and a homogeneous school culture and a practice of speaking to parents as partners?

The choice of the principals was conducted in a way to have a maximum of contrasts in the sample. The procedure is called *theoretical sampling* (Merkens, 2003). One interview was excluded from the sample, because the interviewer lives in the same community as the school concerned. So the political activities in the communal authorities of the interviewer had a bias on the interview. Finally we organised seven interviews in a setting where the communication in the first step was very open and free. At the end of the interviews, we asked questions that had not been treated and we asked for a summary in the sense of drawing a balance. For this reason, we had prepared a guide for the interview with the important topics we would like to hear. We transcribed the interviews literally into High German. But we accepted dialect words and did not correct the word order common in the dialect.

The schools in our sample represent different settings: schools in town and rural schools, schools in the suburbs with middle-class populations and schools that are situated in segregated districts with 60 percent of families with a migration background. Finally we reconstructed eight cases of patterns of interpretation of school principals. In Germany, the methodological approach for the interpretation of transcribed interviews is known as "Objective Hermeneutik" developed by Professor Ulrich Oevermann (Oevermann, 2000; Wernet, 2009). With the help of this methodology, you interpret a text by looking for the latent structure. The latent structure is not only the summarised meaning of the text. We try to look for the context of a practice and to work out the conditions that determine a professional socialisation process concerning work with parents. So, in a sequence analyses we interpret every sentence line by line and word by word. The transcription of the interview is an image of the spoken dialect.

In a first phase of interpretation, we worked out a specific case structure that describes the practice and the strategy of the principal concerned. In the following text, we present three different cases and we try to look at the effectiveness and the success of the strategies applied.

Case studies

We refer to three case studies that represent different patterns of interpretation of principals or school directors:

H.

The first case is a school director in the agglomeration. The percentage of immigrant persons is about 62 percent. During the last century, the community was an industrial area. The first generation of immigrants were workers called to do industrial work in these factories. In the last decade many factories closed and changed to the service sector. The neighborhood changed and became segregated. The immigrants come to live in the community now because the rents for apartments are cheap. H. is the director of all the schools in the community. He has four principals in four school campuses. The school system consists of different kindergartens, primary schools and also secondary schools. Teachers in the schools have a long tradition of dealing with immigrant families. There are several associations and institutions in the community that organise the cultural life for some ethnic groups like Italians, Spanish or Tamils. There are now children from more than 14 different nations in this school. Native speakers are a minority among the students in most classes. This year, the community opened up a centre for children and young people that combine rooms for lunch, a day-care centre, and childcare in the morning and after school and a leisure room for youngsters.

The mission of the school director is to bring public child care to the parents. Firstly, the children and their parents should improve their German. And secondly, he hopes to get them connected to school issues. He is trying to establish a close relationship between school and non-school day-care. So, the new centre for non-school day-care is at the end of a long journey with several projects on each school level which are now unified in the house for children and young people.

The school director organises information meetings for parents together with teachers, translators and cultural mediators. Parents come together in smaller groups after a short overall presentation, where the information is translated into their language. Teachers and cultural mediators work together. In every group, the teachers keep an attendance list. Every family which is not present at the meeting and did not

give a good excuse gets a letter with a call for a personal meeting with the school director. Parents, who do not respond to the letter, are threatened with a fine.

When we take a look at the below text, we see two dimensions: firstly, it is important that every foreign child learns German as soon as possible. A day-care centre is an excellent place to learn the language and also to learn how to behave in our society.

"In Switzerland, five-year-old children start with kindergarten. [There is no outside school care where immigrant children could learn the language.] That is ridiculous. You can laugh about it. So in the time when they can improve their language, we sleep. Therefore, the idea was: (...) we build a day-care centre to reach out to everyone. We cannot force them, but we can tell the immigrant parents that it is important, it is necessary to bring your child to the day-care centre."

Secondly, the intercultural competence of the school director is founded in his biography. Because his parents immigrated to Switzerland, he is familiar with the integration problems by personal experience. Then he was the head of a Swiss school abroad, where he had the same experience with his own children. He appreciated the network of Swiss families in a foreign country, and he is convinced that social networks are important for integration. Moreover, he was the head of a private boarding school; he therefore has the competence to combine school and extra-curricular activities.

"I moved to ... [a foreign country] ten years ago and I taught at a Swiss school. The family was also with me. My child went to pre-school without speaking Spanish. He couldn't express himself verbally. What was the problem? He hit the others... "

In the manner that he defends his ideas, H. is quite dominant with his teachers. In the secondary school a written agreement exists with the expectations and duties of students, teachers and parents. And when H. starts the interview, his statement on school culture is as follows:

"So, we have a concept that has existed now for actually three to four years. But

you cannot see it, you cannot hear it. The fact is that we really try to reach out to the parents quite early, before school begins."

The school is familiar with the programs for immigrant children. But the school culture is marked by the personal engagement of the school director in the school and in the community. He visited almost every network of foreigners and he has excellent relations with the mosque in the community. When he employs new teachers, he prefers teachers with intercultural competences or with a migration background. He instructs his teachers to distinguish between their middle-class life and the life of underprivileged families.

Summarising, H. has a positive view of the world. He believes that he can change social problems, integrate migrants and avoid school absenteeism of parents or children. Personally, he is very much involved and tries to convince parents and policy-makers. He personally designs and controls parent involvement in school and outside school in different networks of foreigners. He is part of a committee that runs the youth club in the community.

S.

S. is about 40 years old. She was a teacher in a primary school for a long time. S is engaged in many projects of school development. Three years ago she was engaged as a school director in a school district with four primary schools in four villages. The villages are in the countryside, there is a village with a majority of farmers and there is a village that is already near to the urban centre with middle class families. In the village with the farmers, social problems with parents hardly occur. Almost everybody is related to one another and problems are solved directly. In the more urban village S. encountered a severe problem with parents who complained about the school and the teachers.

"S: The start in that community was quite difficult. It's now three and a half years ago. The school was the scum. Just like that. "The teachers are scum" - people in the community have talked in that manner. They used very strong swear-words for the teachers in the school. Some parents treated teachers simply below the belt. They attacked (...). Before I started, there had been no structure in the school to address the difficulties. We had young

teachers. After short a time, they quit their job. And there was nothing that has ever been fixed. ”

S. brought some calm into that school and she started to build a structure. To rebuild trust, she organised a survey to get to know the needs of the parents. The feedback was very positive. There was much appreciation. A new mayor was elected and this was the time she started to build a new school culture. Hearing teachers making nasty remarks about parents, S. interfered and started to work with them. How should they communicate and deal with parents? What are the needs and problems parents have? What can we do when parents complain? Which person is contacted first and so on? The teachers began to work with respect for parents. Today they have a normal situation. Parents know how to interact with the school. In the last two years the parents and the teachers of the school have elaborated an agreement about the correct behaviour of children and the rights and obligations of parents. In *Figure 1* we list the two sections about teachers and parents.

As teachers we...

- take our role model
- develop our school as we educate ourselves regularly in the team
 - take responsibility for teaching. We make it informative and varied. The achievement of the curriculum is a priority
 - offer the children an environment that supports the best possible development
 - strengthen the confidence of the children in their own abilities
 - respect each child as an independent personality and meet it with kindness
 - ensure compliance with the rules and respond appropriately to violations
 - maintain good contact with parents and address problems in good time

As parents we...

- take our role model
- create good conditions for the healthy development of our child. We ensure that the child has enough sleep, a healthy diet and adequate clothing.
 - see that our child's homework is done independently and conscientiously. We send our child to school in time and to the class equipped with the necessary school materials.

- give our children the necessary support for school and actively support it throughout the school years. This includes a space to work undisturbed at home, the necessary material and adequate time to work and recreate
 - help our child to master the way to school alone and responsibly
 - support the school, as we ask a child to take care of the school materials
 - participate actively in school life and read the letters from school carefully
 - attend class evenings, otherwise we will inform ourselves about the topics discussed
 - when there are problems, we contact the teacher early
 - we support school in its effort for a friendly and respectful relationships with each other

Figure 1: Extracts from the School Agreement with parents

For the effectiveness of that school the school agreement is a success. The paper was worked out by parents and teachers. Regular meetings take place to speak about problems with parents. When we consider the paper, several dimensions of parent involvement are referred to: health, nutrition and sleep as pre-conditions, learning conditions of the child at home and homework support by the parents, papers and letters for parents, communication and contact with the teachers when problems occur. The school is creating a parent council that will discuss and advise the principle as a form of participation. Some dimensions are not mentioned like the volunteering of parents in the school or the support of the parents' association in the community. We don't know exactly the reason. It may be that these issues were not discussed. It may be that the principal is not in favour of volunteers in the class, we don't know. A strong reason could be the historically strong separation between school and families in Switzerland. Parents' associations that support schools normally place the emphasis on a clear role taken by teachers and parents and advise the principals not to have volunteers in the class who help with the children. Parents only volunteer when there are excursions or special events like a celebration or a school party.

"S: For me it's important to react before a problem escalates. The important thing is that we communicate with parents: if you have questions we are always willing to answer questions. We have open doors, whether it is in the classroom or in the office with me. Come to me when something happened! So things can be solved. I guess we are good at responding in a very clear manner at any time."

So communication with parents has changed to a proper style on a low threshold. They respond when a problem occurs, she says:

"And then we respond very well. We inform all parents immediately. We work with the classes. With the team, I look at how to deal with the problem and how we want to respond. So, we always try to resolve these issues immediately."

When there are educational problems, S. requests other resources: social agencies, parenting trainings or programs to prevent drugs, etc.

S: I think there we are of course smart enough that we usually look for help outside the school (...) The teachers are not able to hold lessons in parent training The teacher advises the parents on school matters or learning issues. When we deal with problems that could affect the education at home or could interfere with the education style of parents we take experts."

Summarising, S. attaches great importance to communication between parents and school. She prevents external attributions with mutual depreciation and she motivates the parents to express their needs. She establishes a written standard of educational behaviour for all parties, parents, students, teachers, the principal and also the administration of the school. When we look at the different forms, we see that S. has a wide range of different issues: parenting, home work, a code of conduct, learning conditions for the children, the involvement of the parents in school. We don't know what she thinks about volunteering or the relations with the community. If we compare with the management style of H., networking in the community is not important for

S. She argues that in these small villages everyone knows each other – therefore, social control is very high and families with migration background are rare.

A.

We analysed a third case of a principal of a school district in the countryside. He is responsible for the management of three primary schools in three villages. The socioeconomic status of these communities is rather high. Farmers and house-owners live in these villages. A. is a former teacher. As a teacher he was very committed. He worked as a teacher trainer with students of the teacher training college.. He was member of a group of teachers that practice the pedagogy of Céléstine Freinet. Therefore he put a strong emphasis on independent learning, on work in atelier groups and on printing the short stories that students wrote in the school. The team of teachers has a great significance for A. School life must be rich with many activities like sport events and celebrations.

When A. speaks about parents, he defends his teachers. Parents are partners of the school. They are expected to criticise a teacher or the school. When a teacher is a good teacher in the class, A. is in a fundamental opposition to the parents.

There is a teacher who does her work thoroughly well. She has been here for 10 years. She is accepted, she does a good job. Some time ago, I do not know why and when it happened, a few people decided to attack this teacher. And that is the way a story moves in the community and comes to the children, right? Of course when parents say: "This will be your teacher now", then you can imagine how they act, right? So, at the school, things have escalated. (.)It is very bad now (...).

A. interprets his role as follows: He is a principal who gives support to his teachers in all situations. He looks upon his teachers as public persons of the community, most of the time well known in many families. But the public reputation of the teacher is not necessarily in accordance with his real performance as a teacher. Therefore, the principal tries to mediate between parents and teacher, but the reality is confusing and difficult to manage. For example, a teacher in a sport lesson had a discussion with students in the equipment

room. The students told their parents that the teacher had become violent.

"The reaction of the parents was: "Violent! Violence against children!" In the evening, I got an email. I looked at the email but read it in the morning. And then I thought, "Oh, this is not good" and I just called the two mothers that had complained. And then she told me that she would be happy if we could discuss the problem and what happened the day before. But the same time, she went into the classroom of that teacher. And there she said in front of all the students: "Such teachers should be dismissed now". That's too much, right? It is really incredible. She did not tell me."

A. tries to help and to understand the needs of the parents. At the same time he pathologises the excessively protective behaviour of parents. The external attribution is: this student has problems at school because the parents behave in a certain manner. He has to calm down the situation and to find a solution. Sometimes we see a role ambiguity between the role of teacher and the role of a principal that supports the teacher. When parents complain, he tries to follow the rules, but sometimes he has to interfere directly. We don't see a strategy that could deescalate the situation.

The practice of this principal is a practice with individual parents who cause difficulties in the school. That's the reason why A. is opposed to the written school agreements with all parents. There is only a small number of parents who need meetings with the principal, and in this situation he normally takes minutes with all the tasks for the teacher, the student and the parents.

In the inner circle of the school, A. is the coach and the trainer for all teachers that do not know how to deal with parents. He monitors meetings with parents and, if he is not satisfied, he organises a supervising meeting with the teacher involved:

"And then you can see: (.) The teacher behaves as if she were on a navigation bridge. Yes, I indeed do have a teacher who behaves like that. I think I could put

her on an A4 sheet of paper (.) And for half an hour she will not move. / / (Laughs) / / It was the extreme way. (.) The parents said nothing, nothing more. And so, half an hour was gone and then she was ready with the program. (.) She was shocked herself and she told me: "Yes, the parents left quickly, right?" And then I told her, "May I show you ... what you've done, right?" "Yes". "But can you take it then?" "Yes, yes." Then I stood there without moving. And then she said: "No it's impossible" (.) I said: "You criticised with the first sentence that you uttered, the parents knew very well: Now, I'm back at school" (...). "But there was only the fear; you were scared actually, right?" Yes, she was totally scared".

Summarising, A. is a principal who defends his teachers against the parents. When something happens at school and parents call him, he starts a process of mediation even before he speaks with the involved teacher. When a child has difficulties at school, he believes that the reason for the problem is the behaviour of the parents. As a former teacher, he is familiar with the educational problems of affluent parents. Because the school district with three villages in the countryside has only a small number of children, he organises events and gives information about parenting. Once a year, he organises a meeting for all parents of the three schools. Experts deal with educational problems. Last year, A. started a survey among parents and he found out that the great majority of parents is satisfied with the school services. A. invests a lot of time in the homepage of the school district. Communication about school life and school events is very important to him and corresponds to the needs of well-situated parents in a community of the suburbs of the capital. When parents complain about teachers, he has a double strategy: firstly, he instructs the teachers on how to behave in a meeting with parents, and secondly, he focuses only on the family and looks for problems in that family. In this situation, his attitude is more like the attitude of a psychologist.

Discussion

We refer to three case studies of school directors or principals in a small canton of Switzerland. Our project is at the beginning of a process that investigates communication between schools and families in different urban and rural settings.

The cases do not represent different types, but we can see a big variation of strategies that are located in a dimension of conservative or progressive style of communication with parents. We summarise the different influences we found on the practise of principals in a model in *Figure 2*.

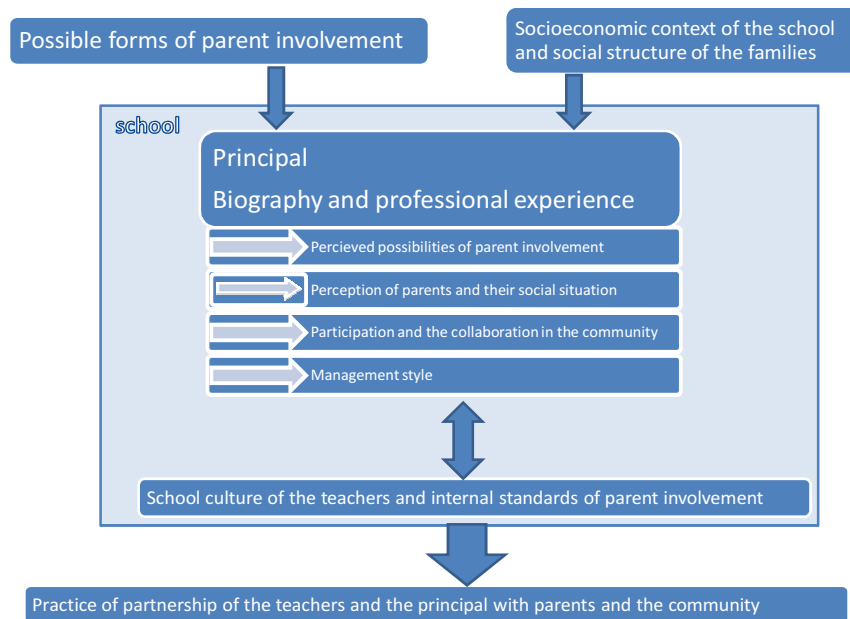


Figure 2. Determinants of the practice of principals

The three cases studies represent different adaptations of principals to the social and socioeconomic structure of parents. H. is interested in having good cooperation with immigrants; S tries to cooperate with parents that criticise teachers or the school. We interviewed other principals, e.g. in communities that had a population with a mixture of different socioeconomic levels. They do not adapt their communication style, but act like a middle-class person. The social background of teachers is mostly a middle-class background, teachers behave in that modus and ignore the fact that thirty percent of parents are immigrants and have poor language skills in German. When we look at the potential of parent involvement and compare the practices of the three case studies with the six dimensions that Epstein et al. (2009) name, we see a quite conservative trend. Legal duties like

meetings to inform parents about school matters or individual meetings to discuss the transition to another school level take place. The role of the principal is to assist teachers when difficulties appear and to coach new teachers how to act with parents. Volunteering of parents is limited to excursions or to assist in school celebrations. Then parents are welcome in a class to watch the group of children how they work or to watch their own child. But in all cases parents are not allowed to assist the teacher in teaching matters. We do not find evidence that learning at home is an issue in the communication. In some papers we found indications about the time a child has to spend in relation to the class. But monitoring of the learning process at home and the control of the working conditions of the child are not mentioned in the interviews.

The involvement of parents in school issues is still under discussion. In many schools now parents' representatives or councils are nominated, but the roles of parents' representatives are not clear yet. In all cases, they can give advice to the principal, but at the same time they have no right to discuss teaching processes in a class. In a council of parents the principal discusses school events, excursions and special school weeks like summer camps, etc. When parents intervene they complain about discipline problems in a class.

The qualification for an employment as a principal or a school director varies between the cantons. In Canton Solothurn a diploma as a teacher is not required, so we can also find managers or executives of the administration as school directors. In our case studies, all three persons have a teaching diploma and a long experience as teachers. School directors that are nominated can undergo further education at the teacher training college. Within this framework, we can see a great variety of professional experiences that influence the communication style of a school director.

H. was raised in a migrant family. He is familiar with the vital problems of migrant families. We can assume that his biography influences his professional career: He was school director in a Swiss school abroad and he was school director in a boarding school, where he could manage the school life and the leisure time of the students. We can see a strong pattern that consists in a belief that learning at home is not helpful and that a day school with educators, who supervise the children doing their homework is the better way. At the same time, children learn the German language and the integration process for the student is easier. Parents at home who discuss whether they will return to their home countries, can demotivate students. The full-time school is the better way to integrate immigrants.

When we have a look at the case study of S., it is obvious that the influence of her continued studies in school development and her professional experience are important points. When she still was a teacher, she was already involved in school development processes. Based on these experiences, a code of conduct for all teachers of the school is crucial to S. She also tries to get an agreement with the parents.

In the case study of A., we see a former teacher in a very small school who struggles to survive, because there are less and less children

in the community. Hence, his strategy is influenced by public relation activities. The image of the school has to be positive, students with difficulties at school and parents that complain do no good to the image of a good school. The role of A. is characterised by his psychologicalising approach.

Finally, we can have a look at the interdependence of the management style of the principal and the school culture. In the case studies of H. and S. we can see school directors who emphasise the school culture in the sense that they establish formal or non-formal standards, how to relate to parents among their teachers. And we see that the standards fit the school context and are influenced by the attitudes of the school director. In the case study of A., we see a school culture, where every teacher has his own strategy and the principal has – like a free back in soccer - the role of a player, who solves crucial situations at the last moment. Also, we see three different ways written correspondence is handled. The school of S. was a pilot school for the canton that established a written standard in together with parents. The parents and the teachers formulated their wishes and intentions in a written agreement. And we see the school culture of H., who is convinced that written agreements are of no use, when you deal with families with poor language skills. Secondly, written standards are dysfunctional for middle class parents, who perform education in a good way. They are indignant that a school director gives advice to them on how to educate children. And in the third case study,

A. opposes school agreements. There is no need to have a homogeneous school practice. A. prefers individual agreements and measures that are adapted to the concrete situation treated with a parent.

Outlook

With its new education policy, Canton Solothurn establishes partly independent schools with principals or school directors in a school district who develop a profile of the school and implement a quality management system. Parent involvement is an element of the quality management system of primary schools. We see that the practice of principals varies in function of the socioeconomic setting of the school and the personal management style of the school director. The practice of parent involvement of a school

director is influenced by attitudes which are built in his biography and his professional experience. Depending on the assertiveness of the principal the practice of the principal forms the school culture and in some cases formal standards are established, for example school agreements with parents.

Parent involvement should help to develop a special profile of a school. We see that parents are in many cases not involved or only slightly involved in the process. We can say that the process of school improvement needs time to be established, but we also see, that in a small canton with 250,000 inhabitants, the parliament and the education department are the leading organs that support and instruct school innovations. Until now, school directors have been more like executive managers that implement innovations which come down the hierarchy in a top-down approach. School innovations normally have a strict timetable. Therefore, there is little space for a school director to establish an individual profile of a school. We can hope that the external evaluation of the schools with independent evaluation committees will judge the school improvement process of a primary school and will also judge the quality of the communication and the cooperation with parents.

In a next step we want to look at the attitudes and the practice of teachers. Teachers keep in

touch with parents in a formal and informal way. They are responsible for the information requirements and justify the decisions of the school when selections or promotions of students happen. We would like to explore the interaction with the principal and the differences in the practice of parent involvement. We want to introduce empirical results to teacher training. The message could be: there is no profit to a child with learning difficulties when teachers complain about the incompetence or absence of parents. They have to look at the social situation and to adapt their practice to the needs of the individual family. Therefore, they have to develop knowledge about the strategies of parent involvement. They also have to match the specific demands of the school director and have to learn from each other. In this way, parent involvement becomes a part of the school's improvement process to supports students with difficulties at school.

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